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Kyrgyzstan: Recent Developments and U.S. Interests

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Summary

This report examines faltering reforms and other challenges to Kyrgyzstan's independence that have raised U.S. concerns. It discusses U.S. policy and assistance for democratization and other programs. Basic facts and biographical information are provided. This report may be updated. Related products include CRS Issue Brief IB93108, *Central Asia's New States*, updated regularly.

U.S. Policy ¹

According to the Bush Administration, the United States wants Kyrgyzstan to democratize, develop free markets, become integrated into the global economy, remain at peace with its neighbors, and provide for the welfare of its citizens. U.S. aid aims to enhance Kyrgyzstan's sovereignty and integrity and its ability to protect human rights, prevent proliferation, halt trafficking in narcotics and persons, and combat transnational crime and terrorism. Kyrgyzstan provides "crucial support for coalition forces" for Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom, and the Global War on Terrorism, "most notably in hosting the Ganci Coalition Airbase" (State Department, *FY2005 Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations*). Kyrgyzstan has been a "dependable and outspoken ally in the global war on terrorism" (*Patterns of Global Terrorism 2003*).



Source: Map Resources. Adapted by CRS. (08/02 M.Chin)

Cumulative U.S. humanitarian and technical budgeted assistance to Kyrgyzstan for FY1992-FY2003 was \$697.35 million (FREEDOM Support Act and other Agency funds), with Kyrgyzstan ranking third in such aid per capita among the new independent states

¹ Sources include Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report: Central Eurasia*; *RFE/RL Newslines*; *Eurasia Insight*; International Monetary Fund (IMF); the State Department's *Washington File*; and Reuters and Associated Press (AP) newswires.

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of the former Soviet Union. The United States also facilitated the delivery of Department of Defense excess and privately donated commodities worth \$202.4 million in FY1992-FY2003. Estimated aid for FY2004 (FREEDOM Support Act and other foreign aid, excluding Defense and Energy Department aid) was \$43.2 million. The Administration's FY2005 request for \$39.5 million in foreign aid for Kyrgyzstan is planned primarily for local and national democratization, judicial reform, and law enforcement equipment and training to combat drug trafficking, organized crime, and terrorist financing. The Administration states that Kyrgyzstan "has been a leader within Central Asia in developing democratic institutions," although there have been setbacks, and it requests funding for FY2005 to help the country prepare for free and fair legislative and presidential elections. Since Akayev has stated that he will abide by constitutional term limits and not run for re-election, the Administration hopes that the 2005 presidential race will become "a model for peaceful, democratic transfer of executive power in the region" (*Congressional Budget Justification*).

Kyrgyzstan: Basic Facts

Area and Population: Land area is 77,415 sq. mi.; about the size of South Dakota. Population is 5.05 million (International Monetary Fund, 2003 est.).

Ethnicity: 65.7% Kyrgyz; 11.7% Russians; 13.9% Uzbeks, 1% Uighurs; 0.4% Germans, and others (Kyrgyz Statistical Comt., 2001 est.). Ethnic Uzbeks are a majority in southern Kyrgyzstan. About 420,000 ethnic Kyrgyz reside elsewhere in the former Soviet Union and 170,000 in China.

Gross Domestic Product: \$1.9 billion; per capita GDP is about \$376 (IMF, 2003 est., current prices).

Political Leaders: *President:* Askar Akayev; *Prime Minister:* Nikolay Tanayev; *Chairman of Assembly of People's Representatives:* Altay Borubayev; *Chairman of the Legislative Assembly:* Abdygany Erkebayev; *Foreign Minister:* Askar Aytmatov; *Defense Minister:* Lt. Gen. Esen Topoyev.

Biography: Akayev was born in 1944 and trained as a physicist. In 1987, he was elected vice president of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences, later becoming its president. In 1990, he became a member of the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee. In 1990, ethnic riots in Osh region led to demands for the ouster of the Kyrgyz Communist Party (KCP) head. When the Kyrgyz Supreme Soviet met in October 1990, it rebuffed the KCP head's bid to become president and elected Akayev. In October 1991, Akayev was reaffirmed as president in an uncontested popular vote, and was re-elected in 1995 and 2000.

Contributions to Campaign Against Terrorism

The Kyrgyz government declared its support for the war on terrorism almost immediately after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States and agreed to provide information on terrorists. President Akayev stressed that the terrorist threat to Central Asia emanating from Afghanistan had increased, and on September 25, 2001, stated that he had approved a U.S. request to use Kyrgyz airspace for counter-terrorist operations in Afghanistan. In late November 2001, it was reported that U.S. combat aircraft were to be deployed in Kyrgyzstan. Reportedly, Uzbekistan's restrictions on flights from its airbases were a major spur to this U.S. decision. At the same time, Akayev reportedly granted Russian requests for the use of airfields and other means to facilitate Russian aid deliveries to Afghanistan. The U.S. military repaired and upgraded the air field at the Manas international airport (the U.S. facilities were named after the late New York firefighter Peter J. Ganci), and war support to Afghanistan began in March 2002. The Defense Department reported in October 2003 that the airbase was the "primary hub" for trans-shipping personnel, equipment, and supplies to Afghanistan. In early 2004, the airbase hosted about 1,100 troops from the United States, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, South Korea, and Spain. The Administration may be considering asking

Kyrgyzstan for long-term access to military facilities for emergency training and staging by rapid-reaction forces. Such access might involve no permanent or a very limited U.S. military presence (*Washington Post*, March 25, 2004).

Just after U.S.-led coalition forces began ground operations in Iraq in late March 2003, Kyrgyzstan's Legislative Assembly (lower chamber) issued a statement calling for the United States to cease "gross violations" of international law. Although Kyrgyz Foreign Minister Aytmatov told Vice President Cheney during a June 2003 U.S. visit that Kyrgyzstan was ready to send peacekeepers to Iraq and Afghanistan, in April 2004 the presidential spokesman and the defense minister announced that Kyrgyzstan had no plans to send peacekeepers to either country.

Foreign Policy and Defense

Akayev's 1999 foreign policy concept called for close relations with ancient "silk road" route countries, including China, former Soviet republics, and Turkey, Iran, India, and Pakistan, including because landlocked Kyrgyzstan must rely on its neighbors for access to world markets. Kyrgyzstan has also pursued good relations with Western states in its search for aid. Cultivating good ties with China, Akayev joined leaders from Russia, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan in 1996 and 1997 in signing agreements with China on demarcating and demilitarizing the former Soviet-Chinese border. Kyrgyzstan's cession to China of a small mountainous border area fueled protests by many people in Kyrgyzstan and calls that the government not make the same "mistake" in border talks with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Many in Kyrgyzstan are concerned that China's economic and population growth in bordering areas threatens the country. Kyrgyzstan's relations with Uzbekistan have been marked by trade, border, and other disputes.

Akayev has stressed close relations with Russia. Reasons include hoped-for economic and trade benefits and security ties to alleviate concerns about Chinese and Uzbek intentions. While relying on security ties with Russia, Kyrgyzstan has pursued ancillary (and perhaps partly countervailing) security ties with the United States, NATO, and China that Akayev in December 2003 hailed as creating "comprehensive" security. Kyrgyzstan and Russia concluded a Friendship and Cooperation Treaty in 1992, and Kyrgyzstan signed the Commonwealth of Independent States' (CIS) Collective Security Treaty (CST) in 1992 and 1999. These and other agreements call for cooperation with Russia in training and defense. Several hundred Russian border troops (most reportedly were Kyrgyz citizens) guarded the Chinese border until 1999, when Russia handed over control to Kyrgyzstan, citing costs and other reasons. However, Russia reversed its pullout with the signing of a 15-year military basing accord with Kyrgyzstan in September 2003 for use of the Soviet-era Kant airfield near Kyrgyzstan's capital of Bishkek. The base hosts about 20 aircraft and 300-700 troops that are said to be units of a CST rapid deployment force and is a scant 20 miles from the Ganci airbase. Although the purpose of the base ostensibly is to combat regional terrorism and defend southern CIS borders, Putin stressed that the base "enshrines our military presence in Kyrgyzstan," appearing to underline that the base also counters U.S. and NATO security influence. The CIS Anti-Terrorist Center (ATC) — a body created largely at Putin's urging to facilitate cooperation between Russia's Federal Security Service and other CIS intelligence bodies — set up a regional "branch" in Bishkek after 9/11.

Kyrgyzstan's armed forces numbered about 10,900 ground, air force, and air defense troops. There are also about 5,000 border guards (*The Military Balance 2003-2004*). Most of the troops are ethnic Kyrgyz conscripts, though some officers are Russians. A defense development plan approved in August 2002 called for creating a small and mobile army trained in mountain warfare to combat terrorists. Kyrgyzstan joined NATO's Partnership for Peace (PFP) in 1994 and has participated in many PFP exercises in the United States, Central Asia, and elsewhere.

A reported 800 guerrillas belonging to the terrorist Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and to rogue groups from Tajikistan invaded Kyrgyzstan in July-August 1999, taking Japanese geologists and others as hostages and occupying several Kyrgyz villages. They allegedly aimed to create an Islamic state in south Kyrgyzstan as a springboard for jihad in Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan received urgent air support from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and expelled the invaders in October 1999. The incursion illustrated ties between terrorists in Central Asia, Russia (Chechnya), and Afghanistan, and the need for Kyrgyzstan to bolster its defenses. A reported 500 IMU and other insurgents again invaded southern Kyrgyzstan (others invaded Uzbekistan) in August 2000, taking U.S. tourists as hostages and causing thousands of Kyrgyz to flee. Uzbekistan provided air and other support, but Kyrgyz forces were largely responsible for defeating the insurgents by late October 2000. The State Department designated the IMU as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in September 2000. According to the State Department, the IMU did not invade the region in the weeks before 9/11, in part because Al Qaeda had secured IMU aid for Taliban fighting against the Afghan Northern Alliance. Although much of the IMU has been decimated by U.S.-led coalition operations in Afghanistan, the IMU has continued some activities in Kyrgyzstan. In 2002 and 2003, the IMU set off bombs in Bishkek and Osh. Kyrgyzstan arrested the bombers in May 2003, allegedly before they were able to carry out a plan to bomb the U.S. Embassy. In November 2003, Kyrgyzstan arrested others who allegedly had targeted U.S. interests (*Patterns of Global Terrorism 2003*). Kyrgyzstan also has jailed dozens of members of the Hizb ut-Tahrir Islamic extremist group and of the Eastern Turkestan Liberation Organization, which calls for independence for China's Xinjiang region.

Political and Economic Developments

President Akayev has orchestrated frequent constitutional changes to preserve and enhance his powers. A new constitution approved in 1993 established a presidential system with separation of powers and expansive human rights guarantees. Akayev held an October 1994 referendum (an illegitimate process under the constitution) to approve constitutional amendments to weaken the legislature. He argued that the constitution was too "idealistic" since "people are not prepared for democracy," and that a "transitional period" was needed. The amendments created a bicameral legislature called the Jogorku Kenesh (Supreme Council), consisting of a Legislative Assembly that served continuously and represented "all people," and an Assembly of People's Representatives that met in regular sessions and represented regional interests. Only after the referendum were detailed constitutional provisions published. Akayev spearheaded another constitutional referendum in February 1996 to give him greater powers to veto legislation, dissolve the legislature, and appoint all but the prime minister without legislative confirmation, while making impeachment more difficult, along the lines of Russia's Constitution. According to the State Department, the referendum was marked by fraudulent voting. Despite these restrictions on its powers, the legislature increasingly asserted itself in law-making and

oversight. Moving to further weaken it, Akayev held a referendum in October 1998 to restrict its influence over bills involving the budget or other expenditures, limit a legislator's immunity from removal and prosecution, increase the size of the Legislative Assembly to 60, and decrease the size of the Assembly of People's Representatives to 45. Despite these successive limitations on its powers, the legislature continues to display a degree of independence by overriding presidential vetoes, criticizing government policies, and voting on confidence in the prime minister and cabinet.

Kyrgyzstan's most recent February 2000 Legislative Assembly election was a setback for democratization, according to the U.S. State Department. Observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) criticized the disqualification of prominent opposition parties and candidates, the pro-government composition of electoral boards, harassment of opposition candidates, and irregularities in vote-counting. The OSCE concluded that the October 29, 2000, presidential election was a further setback to democratization, though it hailed the democratic sentiments of many election officials and voters as promising for the future. Kyrgyzstan's Central Electoral Commission (CEC) registered six candidates for the race, including incumbent President Akayev, but disqualified major opposition and other prospective candidates. Akayev officially won 74.5% of 1.46 million votes cast. Irregularities included media bias, ballot box-stuffing, and fraudulent vote-counting, according to the OSCE.

Seeking more presidential powers, Akayev in 2002 formed a Constitutional Council composed of government and civil society representatives to propose amendments, which were then passed on to an Expert Group of officials and scholars to finalize. As occurred in Kazakhstan, the government-led group axed many Council suggestions and added many others without public input, according to the State Department. A February 2, 2003, referendum on the amendments was deemed "highly flawed" by the State Department, because of multiple voting, manipulated ballot counting, and forged results. The amended constitution boosts presidential powers at the expense of legislative powers. Also as in Kazakhstan, former presidents now have immunity from prosecution and cannot be detained, searched, or interrogated. Two controversial provisions were removed on January 21, one giving the president absolute veto power over legislation and the other eliminating the right of citizens to appeal to the Constitutional Court. The amendments create a 75-member unicameral legislature after its next election in 2005. The 2004 constitutional changes eliminate party list voting in legislative elections, a provision many of the 43 registered parties fear as threatening their ability to gain seats and hence to survive politically. Also of potential harm to democratization, a new election code was signed into law in January 2004 that the OSCE stated does "not establish a legal framework that provides for democratic elections." The code does not ensure that electoral commissions are impartial, that monitoring is permitted at all stages of the electoral process, and that voting and tabulation are transparent. Despite the limitations of the code, the United States urges that upcoming elections be free and fair (*Supporting Democracy and Human Rights*, 2004).

Kyrgyzstan's human rights record was poor and worsened in some areas during 2003, according to the State Department's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2003*. However, compared to other Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan has a less objectionable record, some observers argue. Security forces at times beat and mistreated detainees and there were "many cases" of arbitrary arrest or detention. Human rights advocates, oppositionists, and disfavored religious minorities sometimes were targeted

for police abuse. The government reported that 20% of prison inmates die each year, primarily from disease and malnutrition, but prison conditions improved slightly during 2003. Some police were held responsible for abuses. Also, a governmental Ombudsman's Office established in 2002 appeared in a few cases to defend human rights. Ar Namys (Honor) Party head Feliks Kulov was the only political prisoner, according to the State Department. In April 2004, rumors appeared that Kulov would be released during a prospective amnesty, but he was not, and a protest by his supporters was suppressed. There were several independent newspapers and television and radio stations. Government control over publishing and distribution at times was used to harass print media. Reporters were at times physically attacked or more often sued for libel (a criminal offense). Foreign media outlets mostly operated freely. The government permitted a private printing press supported by the U.S. Administration and Congress to begin operating in November 2003. The government sometimes harassed Christian groups or Islamic groups viewed as extremist. The June 2003 *Trafficking in Persons Report* listed Kyrgyzstan as having problems with trafficking for prostitution and labor, but the government has taken some moves to discourage such trafficking, such as legislating criminal penalties.

Foreign assistance has been a significant factor in Kyrgyzstan's budget, contributing by 2004 to public foreign debts of \$1.77 billion. The Paris Club of government lenders eased Kyrgyzstan's debt payment burden in 2002 and will probably do so again in 2005. The IMF calls for Kyrgyzstan to limit future borrowing so that it can service its debt. Kyrgyz GDP stopped declining in 1995 and grew 5.2% in 2003, led by increases in gold mining, agriculture and food processing, electricity production, and services. Inflation increased in 2003 to 2.7%. The poverty rate has slowly declined in recent years, but over one-third of Kyrgyz still live in poverty, making the country among the poorest in the world, according to the World Bank. Akayev and the IMF in 2001 launched an initial three-year, \$100 million poverty reduction program. Agriculture accounts for the largest portion of GDP (about 40%) and employs much of the workforce. Gold mining is the major industry and accounted for over one-third of export revenues (\$259.6 million of \$734 million) in 2003. Increased drug trafficking and other crime in recent months led Akayev in April 2004 to warn that "criminals have penetrated the state," particularly the Interior (police) Ministry. Crime and endemic corruption stifle economic growth and private foreign investment. Kyrgyzstan leads Central Asia in the privatization of most farms, industries, housing, and retail outlets. Kyrgyzstan has surplus hydroelectric energy, rare earth mineral reserves, and tourism potential that could aid its development, and is a major wool producer. U.S. technical assistance contributed to Kyrgyzstan's admission into the World Trade Organization in late 1998.